

# In search of the yeti: part III

**“NO lifting or loading for six weeks” read my post-op instructions. There was quite clearly nothing about extreme skiing – I double-checked to be sure. And indeed, there were several important reasons why I should immediately head for the Alps.**

First, my surgery had gone very well and I felt fully recovered from the comminuted radial fracture sustained during my last extreme sporting adventure (cycling in London).

Secondly, I wasn't sure how long I could keep my fitness secret from work, and I knew they'd summon me back pretty much as soon as they realised I could stand.

Thirdly, as a veterinarian I accepted the lifelong obligation to maintain my professional skills and knowledge, and this provided the perfect opportunity to update some of my veterinary cryptzoological skills.

Most importantly, of course, as with the other supposedly mythical or extinct species we veterinary cryptzoologists are dedicated to, there was simply no one else trying to improve the lot of the unjustly neglected European yeti, or *Gigantopithecus modernis yetii*.

## An elusive patient

For three long years I'd been searching for this elusive creature. My previous alpine expeditions had yielded tantalising clues about likely yeti habitats, but unfortunately no actual sightings (a big furry beast located on a mountain ledge one night turned out to be a misplaced hiker named Jacques).

However, my suspicions about the remote Vallee Blanche had been growing for several years. Skiers regularly disappear without trace in this rugged, isolated, glacial valley, and the numerous deep crevasses provide ample shelter. Surely if the yetis were out there it would be an ideal place to find them.

Accordingly, to minimise my carbon emissions I boarded an overnight bus from London to Chamonix, in the heart of the Alps,

disembarking some 21 hours later into a light snowstorm. No taxis were visible, so I trudged through the snow to my budget hostel. The rarity of our patients is exceeded only by that of our financial recompense, which has always struck me as unjustly contrary to the nobility of our lonely calling.

## Skiing blind

For two years my injuries had prevented me from skiing, and I now had only two days to practice before risking life and limb on the glaciers. I

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continues his long-term search for mythological species with a trip to the Alps and some rather nerve-racking and bone-jangling skiing

therefore collected my skies and immediately hit the slopes. Unfortunately, this is where things began to go somewhat awry.

The snowstorm refused to stop, and soon I could barely see from one pole to the next. My world became murkier than a veterinary jurisprudence lecture, and soon I couldn't distinguish between sky, air and ground, which might have been amusing had I not been trying to navigate steep slopes high up a mountain.

Next, my lifeline of poles disappeared. Only when the surface below suddenly attempted to throw me off my skies did I realise I'd skied off the side of the run. At least I was getting familiar with deep powder which was, after all, the plan.

Two days of such murk left me little better prepared, but the single promised day of fine weather would not wait. It would be my only chance to spot any yetis against the endless whiteness of the Vallee. And so I joined a mixed group of skiers from around the world, and boarded a cable car for the heights of Aiguille du Midi – the legendary “Needle of the South”.

Perched on a spire of rock rising from precipitously ice and snow to a height of over 3,800 metres, the Needle offered the only access to the Vallee and its surrounding world of remote alpine summits, which stretched as far as the eye could see.

## Lessons in fear

First, however, we all had to descend the infamous north-east ridge to the start of the glacial plain. To the right this sheer ridge of windswept snow plummeted steeply some 200 metres to minor crevasses. The slope to the left was only about 30 metres, but thereafter went vertical for thousands of feet. Thankfully, we were all roped

together by now. The ropes don't actually stop most falls of course, but it was comforting to know that should any of us slip, at least we wouldn't fall alone.

Somehow no one slipped on their clumsy ski boots, and I even managed to prize my semi-frozen fingers from their death grip upon the rope, ready for the next big challenge. Confronting us was the first massive drop we planned to ski. Naturally it was covered in deep powder. It was time to see if my two days of semi-blinded practice would be sufficient.

Three ignominious falls later – one of which had even been on the flat – the answer was horribly clear. I was obviously not up to skiing deep powder, and now risked substantially slowing our group, all of whom were frustratingly expert. The markedly lower oxygen levels weren't helping either. However, we'd already descended so far that helicopter rescue was now the only way out. And so I had little choice but to plunge on, half hoping a crevasse would end my profound embarrassment.

## Above the clouds

Soon, however, things began looking up. For one thing, picturesque crevasses started to appear all around, rendered deceptively innocent by a fluffy layer of powder. Our French mountain guide, Nicolai, informed us they were up to 60 metres deep. Above these, unbroken snow and ice stretched to a horizon ringed by jagged white peaks, reaching skywards towards the perfect blue.

The precipitous drops continued, but being able to see the surface I was attempting to ski was starting to yield results. With rigid muscles and a strength borne of desperation, I surprised myself by repeatedly managing to turn as each crevasse approached. I briefly scanned each I passed for yeti footprints but was distracted time and again by an irritating fear of death.

At least my team-mates were having the decency to fall, which made me feel considerably better. I particularly appreciated a small Japanese woman who would fly past kamikazi-style with cries of “Eeeaaaii...” only to stack it spectacularly shortly thereafter.

All too soon, however, the 17km whizzed by. We dropped 2,800 metres, passing into, and finally beneath, a thick layer of



Andrew Knight on the north-east ridge of Aiguille du Midi.

cloud. Numerous potential yeti lairs were noted from the corner of my eye, but the constant danger of crevasses, and worse, the humiliation of embarrassing falls, unfortunately precluded further investigation.

## Receding glaciers

All too soon we reached the end of our route. In midwinter it's possible to ski all the way back to town, but the end of the season snowmelt required us to catch a train. The original cable car to the station was built at ice level, but in recent years global warming has shrunk the glacier an average of 10 metres annually, with the result that we now had to carry our gear some 100 metres up an increasingly lengthy series of stairs bolted to the cliff face. All alpine glaciers are similarly endangered, and in time may vanish entirely.

Similarly threatened by shrinking ice, the yeti may well share the fate of the polar bear. Yet there must be some way to find it before it vanishes completely. Only then can we save it from extinction.

Given the seriousness of the problem, I thought it rather unsympathetic of a colleague to suggest that, “Perhaps you should rub yourself in yeti poo and knit a tasty tender young yak costume.” My knitting is even worse than my skiing, so if anyone has a better idea, please do let me know.



Descending the NE ridge of Aiguille du Midi.

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